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REPORT BY REICHSMINISTER SPEER ON A VISIT TO THE WESTERN FRONT, FROM
DECEMBER 15 TO DECEMBER 31, 1944.

TRANSLATED BY

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Report on a visit made by Speer to the western front,
from December 15 to December 31, 1944.

The following observations were made during the visit:

1. The confidence of the men in their weapons has risen amazingly. All the modern improvements in weapons and tanks contribute to the excellence of German equipment. The number of weapons and the amount of equipment made ready for service show the generals that our equipment production figures were not exaggerated.
2. Experience with the tanks shows that the new programme is proceeding well. The Panther is receiving special praise, and is far superior to any of the enemy's tanks. Its manoeuvrability is said to be excellent, and it can be claimed that the Panther of today has no major faults. The 38 T is an object of enthusiasm wherever it appears. Its most enthusiastic supporters describe it as in some ways better than the Panther, as it has advantages in a restricted area because it is built low and is easy to manage. In action against the Sherman at close range it has proved itself superior in the power of penetration of its guns and also in the power of resistance of its forward armour.
3. The spare part situation for tanks has improved considerably as regards the main components; the number of motors and machinery is satisfactory, but there is not yet a sufficient supply of side gearing. The greatest deficiency lies in certain single parts, which can be reckoned in tons and are completely lost in transit. These single parts (e.g. gasket collars, bolts, screws etc.) can certainly be produced if a detailed knowledge of them is obtained.

The Inspector-General of Tank Forces has agreed that this constantly recurring demand for single parts must be carefully examined and recorded, so that these spare parts, the lack of which often causes the complete unserviceability of many tanks, can be obtained at once. It is certain that the tank troops can be helped in this way. Similar lists for the artillery and others using spare parts can also be made.

4. Behind the front areas (around Adenau and Münstereifel) considerable air combats could often be seen, especially in the first days, between enemy fighter-bombers and German fighters. It must be concluded from this that the German fighters attacked the enemy with great daring. It seemed as if the twin-engined Lightning is inferior to the German fighters in spite of its disconcerting manoeuvrability; in one dogfight over Adenau 10 Lightnings were shot down in half an hour by German fighters, although their number was not greatly superior. In dogfights between single-engined fighters it is very difficult to ascertain, unless one is quite near, whether a German or an enemy fighter has been shot down; as both look identical.

5. In the forward areas no German fighters were to be seen in combat. The enemy had a large number of fighter-bombers in action, which our fighters could hardly oppose, as they were always making swift attacks on different parts of the front. Only an air force with an extraordinarily large number of aircraft and the fuel necessary for them would be able to combat them with an extended barrier defence. Enemy fighters even cover woodland paths, in which until now one would have felt safe. The wood is searched in great detail section by section, the guns of the aircraft causing far more damage than bombs. Flak areas are avoided by enemy aircraft as soon as they are discovered. It is always possible to pass by flak areas on plains, as the zone of fire can only embrace an area of two square kilometres at most.

6. The enemy occasionally carries out strafing at height. Traffic carries on in spite of this hindrance, but with lights out. It is clear that with this nightly hindrance and the total lack of movement by day, even when the road system is good, our movements equal only half to one third of the enemy's, who can move practically unhindered by night and day.

7. Another great hindrance to movements, especially of supply, is brought about by the condition of the roads in the Eifel and Ardennes Areas. It is not because the road surfaces are bad, since they are indeed generally satisfactory, but because all the main roads run steeply up and down the irregular volcanic heights of the Eifel and Ardennes, since there is an almost complete absence of long valleys. The road consists mainly of long climbs and countless curves, and has almost the driving difficulties imposed by an Alpine road (such as the Brenner and other Alpine passes). The space available to lorries is thus greatly limited. Lorries must do most of their journey in first and second gear, and very old parts are made completely useless by being damaged, and so the tonnage available is rapidly reduced.

8. For all these reasons the study and mastering of the supply problems is of decisive importance in carrying on offensive warfare - this applies to us in a greater degree than to the enemy. It must however be taken into consideration that the Allies, as sea-faring nations, ascribe much more importance to the supply problem than we do. They have an exact knowledge of these problems from sea warfare and know how to estimate them. It shows also the perception of the enemy that they continue to carry out a systematic campaign against our traffic on all fronts. The operational plans of the High Command and the ensuing orders are not always formed to synchronise with the supply problem. Apparently supply is often given a subordinate place in preliminary planning, although the solution of the supply problem means that the battle is half won already. If supply is not assured the operation will fail.

9. It is therefore of the greatest importance that for operations such as that of December 16 by B Army Group, staffs should be formed which will have the special task of preparing plans for transport and supply, and which will carry out these plans during the operation. It is without a doubt impossible and unnecessary to maintain a permanent staff of specialists for this task in every army group, as our movements are generally very small because of lack of fuel and transport space. Practice and valuable experience, which otherwise come automatically in a highly motorised group, are therefore lost. There must therefore be a staff available for those special operations which entail greater supply problems. This staff will be constantly occupied with the problems that arise during these operations, and with the specialised knowledge and experience gained in the course of time, the staff will be able to determine with precision what is practicable and what is not. In more extensive operations this staff of specialists must come together beforehand and make preparations for the finishing of the operation.

10. It should be arranged that these officers have reasonable chances of promotion in their career. This is important if the Quartermaster General of an Army Group can only hold the rank of colonel, and if the supply staff officers subordinate to him are mostly majors or below. This results in the officers being transferred after less than one year as there are no more establishments for further promotion; therefore a body of specialists cannot be built up. Meanwhile where are those officers who mastered the problems of supply with the victorious panzer divisions and armies in France and Russia? They have risen so high in rank that they cannot be employed in organising supply, as was intended, with Army Group B. But nevertheless, no rank should be considered too high when the supply problem, the most important problem in any battle, has to be mastered.

11. The aim of all measures taken must be the increase of transport volume by better use of the small space available. The load carried by each lorry can be increased by 30-40% if traffic movements are planned more carefully.

12. In addition it is most important that the military police used for the control of such traffic should be selected for this special purpose and should be more intensively trained. In peacetime only the best and most intelligent policemen were used for traffic control, after having received intensive training for this purpose. It should not be presumed that things have become simpler on main roads. Selection of these military police must therefore be undertaken very carefully, as it is upon them that the success of the supply services depends to a large extent. It is also necessary that energetic officers, of high rank if possible, should be nominated for every supply route as "Route Commandants". The Route Commandant must have complete authority over troops on his road. He may, for example, have them brought from their billets, by night or day, to clear the road of ice or of any obstacle to traffic such as transports and panzers which have broken down, without the possibility of objections being raised. He must also have authority to carry out this work, with authority to impose punishments, so that he may, for example, cause leave to be forfeited in a case of bad driving. He should be authorised to impose punishments relating to men only, and should not be allowed to confiscate vehicles etc. Route Commandants and their staffs, even if the staffs are small, must be equipped with radio, so that it is possible for them to plan diversions in plenty of time, and to advise one another as to the condition of the road. These measures are not wasteful if these groups are used as special troops in operations involving a great deal of movement.

13. The lethargy of the men and also of the officers when traffic difficulties arise is astounding. Nobody bothers to remove obstacles. Thousands of men idly watch traffic jams, and in spite of the danger of fighter-bomber attacks, nobody bothers to think out a way of removing the obstacle, although this is often very simple. The traffic would often flow more smoothly if the vehicles would spread out when travelling uphill, or if a lorry which has broken down were to be pushed away from a curve. The drivers and commanders of motorised units must be specially trained in these matters, so that they see that their obligation to remove obstacles to traffic is as important as going into action against the enemy. Anything lost here through lack of initiative results in a much greater loss when facing the enemy.

14. The erection of signs on the roads is often inadequate, as they are always being destroyed by enemy air attacks, or are made illegible at important crossings. To aid the smooth flow of traffic, it is necessary that in every district, inhabitants who know the surrounding country well should work with the military police, helping with the traffic enquiries. In darkness it is impossible to find a way through the smaller towns with a 1: 100,000 map, as destruction by aircraft has often removed all recognisable landmarks. One often sees officers trying to find the right way in these towns, and behind them the waiting columns, which often bar the way of other columns at crossings behind the front.

15. Rail transport is an especially difficult question. The greatest difficulty arises in knowing when the transport has reached its destination or where it has been held up. The railway communication services have been almost completely destroyed and it will be impossible to make them completely serviceable again. Other ways must be found to maintain contact with important transports during their journeys, otherwise long delays will arise during unloading, transport columns will not be dealt with at once at the unloading stations, loaded wagons will stand around useless, and, in the event of an air attack on the station, will be completely destroyed. It is no doubt possible that through the cooperation of subordinate members of the Party (local group leaders) with the station master a communication service could be set up to deal with trains passing through and arriving at the station. The security regulations against this must be lifted.

Messages can doubtless be taken from the local group leader to the district leader twice daily. It should be made possible for the district leader to take especially important messages twice daily by car or motor cycle to a deputy of the area leader with the army group or army corps.

Also the Party must insist that both civilian and army trains and wagons which have been standing on the track any length of time, and which cannot be driven further, must be unloaded there and then, as far as this is possible.

16. It is necessary to organise the cooperation of the Party in the front line areas to a greater extent than before. One often has the feeling that army official services and troops of the line have no idea of the help that can be obtained from the Party. The possibilities of this do not seem to be exhausted, especially in cases where help can be improvised. Courses must be arranged later to spread an understanding of the organisation and administration of the Party, so that officers can learn how to enlist the help of the Party.

17. It must be emphasised that reinforcement and supply are to be considered more important than before. It must also be stressed again that strength returns are misleading in that they do not give the numbers of men really in action. Apparently also the number of reinforcements and amounts of ammunition and supplies gathering at the rear are included in these reports. While the present difficulties of supply exist, which are caused by enemy air activity, no excuse will be accepted if in future the High Command does not receive two separate reports, one giving the total strength of reinforcements, and one giving the strength of the division in action. Reinforcement and supply must be carried out without using too many intermediary camps. It is unnecessary that in order to supply one section of front in the west, intermediary camps for the whole of the west should be provided. It must be possible to bring reinforcements directly to the armies. Every intermediary camp means new arrangements, takes up more time, causes more handling of material, and in the case of longer distances, new wagons are needed to reach the final destination. It is all the same if the wagons are needed for a 30 or 300 kilometre journey, the railway has to undertake the task of assembling new rolling stock.

18. The question of a possible effect on production by enemy air attacks on communications must be considered. The destruction of communications by strafing and bombing has sometimes meant that the divisions were out of touch with their army corps or army group for a considerable time. It is possible to construct an emergency network of wireless communications, which cannot be easily tapped, using decimetre radio apparatus. Production must therefore change over from the present field telephone to radio telephone installations. Details are being discussed with A.O.C.-in-C. Signals.

19. It has at times been said, by the C.O. of the 12th Grenadier Division among others, that the N.C.Os and officers of the 12th Hitler Youth Panzer Division are too young and too inexperienced in battle. This is to be seen in the high rate of losses. Young officers of the Hitler Youth Division confirm this impression. Therefore it would be practical to mix with the Hitler Youth Division older, more experienced soldiers who would give it the necessary steadiness and battle experience in critical situations.

20. The anti-tank weapon, the Panzerfaust, is described everywhere as an exceptional weapon. Considering the large production figures it is possible that this weapon may be used generally by the infantry, and not only by anti-tank units.

21. There are complaints that the hand-grenades often do not explode. Tank crews especially must possess close combat weapons which will not fail them.

22. It is well worth while bringing the fuel conveyor pipes which cross the Rhine still nearer the front during a lull in the fighting, since the fuel losses incurred in transport will thus be greatly reduced. Whenever possible these pipes will be built through wooded and hilly country and not alongside roads and railways.

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